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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes findings from a longitudinal study of 1,215 mothers and children from 10 locations around the United States, focusing on the links between maternal depression and child outcomes. Families were followed from 1 month to 36 months after the birth of their child. Data collection methods included observations of mother-child play at 6, 15, 24, and 36 months, child cognitive and language testing at 36 months, and assessment of maternal depression using the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale. The findings indicate that children of depressed mothers performed more poorly on measures of school readiness, verbal comprehension, and expressive language skills at 36 months than children of mothers who never reported depression. Children of mothers who had more prolonged depression were seen as less cooperative, and their mothers reported the children had more problem behaviors than children whose mothers were never depressed. Children of mothers who were depressed some of the time fell in between these two groups. Children whose mothers were more sensitive did better on cognitive and language tests, and were more helpful during toy clean-up. Their mothers also reported them to be more cooperative and to have fewer problem behaviors, regardless of mothers' level of depression. Lower maternal sensitivity partly explained their children's poorer school readiness, verbal comprehension, and expressive language, and higher rates of problem behavior. (KB)

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NCEDL Spotlights

No. 16 November 1999

Depressed Moms & Child Development

Following are excerpts from a study reported in the September 1999 issue of *Developmental Psychology*. The study, carried out by the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development, is a longitudinal study following more than 1,200 children and families from 10 locations around the US. Begun in 1991, it is one of the most comprehensive on-going child care studies in the nation.

Maternal Depression Linked with Child Development, School Readiness

Children of depressed mothers performed more poorly on measures of school readiness, verbal comprehension, and expressive language skills at 36 months of age than children of mothers who never reported depression, according to new data from a continuing study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Among the authors of the report are 4 investigators from the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL).

Children of depressed mothers were also reported to be less cooperative and to have more problem behaviors at 36 months.

However, maternal sensitivity also played an important role in the well-being of children. Even when mothers were depressed, if they were also sensitive, their children fared better.

Percentage of women in the workforce, 1975-1995 (with children under 6 years of age)

Key findings

- Children of mothers who had more prolonged depression were seen as less cooperative, and their mothers reported the children had more problem behaviors than children whose mothers were never depressed. These children also scored lower on tests of school readiness, expressive language, and verbal comprehension. Children of mothers who were depressed some of the time fell in between these two groups.
- Children whose mothers were more sensitive did better on cognitive and language tests, were more helpful in the clean-up task, and their mothers reported them to be more cooperative and to have fewer problem behaviors, regardless of their mothers' level of depression.
- Lower levels of maternal sensitivity in depressed mothers partly explained their children's poorer school readiness, verbal comprehension, and expressive language and higher rates of problem behavior. This suggests that depression can lead to less sensitive maternal behavior which, in turn, leads to poorer child development.

Discussion

"Among other things, our findings suggest that women who are depressed shouldn't just tough it out but instead should seek help from health-care professionals and support from family and friends," said Martha Cox of NCEDL. She and Margaret Burchinal, also of NCEDL, led UNC-CH's participation in the study.

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"That's because otherwise the children's development could suffer. Even if mothers continue to be depressed, they can still provide the kind of experience their children need," Burchinal said.

Also, women with higher incomes and other advantages were more responsive and played better with their children despite their depression possibly because they were less stressed, said Bob Pianta of the University of Virginia and NCEDL. "Income made no difference in sensitivity and responsiveness among mothers who were not depressed."

Pianta said that earlier research has shown that mothers' interactions with their offspring play a crucial role in children's mental development, of which language skills are an important part.

Investigators consider their sample moderately but not perfectly representative of US mothers and their children. Overall, about 55 percent of the participants were never depressed and 8 percent were chronically depressed.

Women who were despondent most of the time not only were least sensitive but also were the only group to show a decline in sensitivity between the 15-month and 24-month assessments, according to Robert Bradley of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and NCEDL. He said that as toddlers emerged from the period that some call the "terrible twos" and became less willful, interactions with mothers grew more positive.

"We tend in our culture to expect people to deal with their problems by themselves unless those problems are just very extreme," Cox said. "Our group of mothers were not chosen because they had come to clinics for help but were just a community sample of women having children. Other studies have shown that women with young children are particularly vulnerable to depression, and our new findings indicate strongly that the depression can have important consequences for children."

How We Did the Study

This study examined 1,215 mothers and children. It followed families from 1 month to 36 months after the birth of their child.

Researchers rated the sensitivity of the mothers by observing them at play with their children at 6, 15, 24, and 36 months of age. Mothers who were respectful of their children, who were supportive of their children's activities and did not interfere unnecessarily, and who responded appropriately to their children's emotions were rated as sensitive.

In addition, at 36 months, the children were tested for cognitive and language development and observed following requests to clean up toys. Mothers also reported on their children's social behavior.

Most of the children, who are from racially and socially diverse families, now are in the third grade and will be followed at least through the sixth grade.

The mothers were assessed for depression using the *Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale.*

Bradley said that the strengths of the study include its large sample size, the repeated direct assessments, and the diversity of subjects. The work is important, he said, because it helps show the impact of maternal depression of children's development more definitively than any previous research.

Besides UNC-CH, which follows 130 children, other data collection centers are at the universities of Arkansas at Little Rock, California at Irvine, Kansas, New Hampshire, Pittsburgh, Virginia, Washington at Seattle, Wisconsin, and Temple University.

If you want to know more...

NICHD study: <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/early_child_care.htm>
NICHD website: <www.nichd.nih.gov>
NCEDL home page: <www.ncedl.org>

NCEDL is administratively housed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition to UNC-CH partners in NCEDL are the University of Virginia and the University of California at Los Angeles. This project is supported under the Education Research and Development Centers Program, PR/award number R307A60004, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Opinions do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education (www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ECI/), the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, the U.S. Department of Education, or any other sponsoring organization. Permission is granted to reprint this *Spotlight*; we ask that you acknowledge the authors of the paper on which this *Spotlight* is based and the NCEDL.

For more information, contact Loyd Little at (919) 966-0867 or email loyd_little@unc.edu
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